DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 216 386 CS 206 919

AUTHOR Trivisonno, Ann M.
TITLE A Humanities Sequence for Adults at Ursuline College.
PUB DATE Mar 82
NOTE 9p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the College Conference on Composition and Communication (33rd, San Francisco, CA, March 18-20, 1982).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Adults; *Adult Students; Classroom Techniques; College English; Continuing Education; Core Curriculum; *Curriculum Development; Higher Education; *Humanities Instruction; *Interdisciplinary Approach; Nontraditional Students; Reentry Students; *Sequential Approach; *Writing Instruction; Writing Processes
IDENTIFIERS *Writing across the Curriculum

ABSTRACT

Designed specifically for adult students in continuing studies, the sequence of core courses described in this paper reflects an interdisciplinary approach to humanities instruction that places the writing process within the broader context of critical thinking and liberal arts core instruction. The paper describes two course levels: the one entry level course is intended to assist adults in making the transition from the world of work to academe, while the two second-level courses focus on the needs to humanize the study of science and technology and to interpret the arts as expressions of human values. Following these brief descriptions, their common elements are listed, as are various assignments and procedures for incorporating writing instruction in them (especially the entry-level course). A report of the positive evaluations and results of this course sequence for adult students completes the paper. (RL)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED216386

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

"A HUMANITIES SEQUENCE FOR ADULTS AT URSULINE COLLEGE"

A Talk Delivered at the College Conference on Composition and Communication, San Francisco, March 20, 1982

Ann M. Trivisonno

Ursuline College is a four-year Catholic Liberal Arts college which serves approximately 1100 students. We award three degrees: B.A., B.S.N. and A.A. Our location in an eastern suburb of Cleveland enables us to serve the economically, ethnically and racially diverse population of the greater Cleveland area.

Although it was founded as a Catholic college for women Ursuline has always been open to women of all races, creeds and national origins. Today approximately 11 percent of our students are from minority groups and 36 percent are not Catholic. In 1968 our programs were opened to men although men have not been actively recruited. Approximately 3 percent of our student body today are men.

As a result of the increasing number of adults who began applying for admission in the late 1960's the college decided in 1970 to establish special programs to serve them. These included a continuing education program for students over 22 who wished to attend regular classes; an external learning program begun in 1974 for adults who wished to complete a degree through independent study; and a B.S.N. program begun in 1979 for registered nurses. Like many liberal arts colleges Ursuline has found these programs to be the fastest growing areas of the college. This semester 61 percent of the Ursuline student body were admitted through the Center for Continuing Studies, our administrative unit for adult programs.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Ann M. Trivisonno
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

CS206919

Since Ursuline is a liberal arts college, each of these programs was built around a strong core of general requirements in the liberal arts including two courses in expository writing. These courses, drawn from our general curriculum, were intended to give the adult learner a comprehensive introduction to the liberal arts and to develop the "liberal skills" of critical thinking, effective articulation of ideas, analytic reading, and coherent and logical writing. As the number of adults in our student body increased dramatically in the mid 1970's, our faculty, especially our Humanities faculty who teach many of the core courses, began to realize that these courses, which were perfectly satisfactory for our traditional aged students, did not always provide the most stimulating introduction to the liberal arts for our adults. Often these courses did not take into account the unique needs and characteristics of the adult learner. They usually didn't recognize the validity of the prior experiences of adults, nor did they always help adults to understand the nature of the learning process or how to use it to solve problems of real concern to them. Furthermore, since many of the adults who enrolled at Ursuline brought credits in composition from their earlier lives as students, they were not getting the concentrated review and practice in the "liberal skills" that an expository writing course provides. Therefore, after securing the assistance of an NEH consultant, Sr. Ruth Dowd of the School of New Resources, College of New Rochelle, the Humanities faculty decided in 1979 to develop some entirely new courses, for adults only, which would provide a happier marriage of the liberal arts, including writing, and the adult learner. One major advantage of such an approach, we felt, was that it would place the writing process within the broader context of critical thinking and remove it from the narrow province of activities that only English instructors do

or care about. The result of all this effort was a three-course sequence of six-credit humanities-based interdisciplinary courses which has been successfully piloted over the last 18 months with funds provided by NEH.

The first course in the sequence is an entry-level course, called Humanities: Focus on Life, which was designed to assist adults to make the transition from the work world to the academic world. Its goal is to deal with the uncertainties and insecurities of returning adults and to introduce them to their role as active competent learners. In this course students explore the relationship between experience and education, they analyze adult learning styles and they formulate their own goals as learners.

The other two courses were designed as second-level courses. Their purpose is to introduce students to specific areas of the liberal arts through courses which make explicit both the inter-relatedness of human knowledge, and the importance of human values in understanding the forces that shape our lives. In one of the courses, Science and the Human Condition, students consider the nature of science and technology, the need to humanize the study of science, the meaning of values, especially moral values, and finally some recent innovations in the life sciences that have resulted in moral dilemmas. In the other course, Humanities through the Arts, students learn to know and analyze the principles and characteristics of five major art forms, to respond to art on the intellectual and emotional levels, to relate the arts to each other and to their cultural contexts and to interpret the arts as expressions of human values.

All three courses have in common several elements which specifically recognize the needs and characteristics of the adult student:

1. A serious academic program involving books (or experiences of the arts) which are classics of the liberal arts tradition;

2. A discussion forum in which Freire's strategy of problem-posing is used to enable students to integrate past experience with current learning and to adapt this knowledge to their personal needs;

3. A team of instructors who work effectively together to meet the needs of individual students;

4. A sequence of writing assignments which are carefully structured to give students practice in moving up the ladder of abstraction from literal understanding through analysis to generalization and integration;

5. A format that is convenient for adult students of one three-hour evening session per week and five all-day Saturday sessions.

Since Humanities: Focus on Life is our entry-level course and it generally enrolls adults who have been away from the academic world for some time, it provides additionally a program of formal instruction in writing and reading. This program is designed to assist those who never knew, or who do not remember, how to transform the fruit of the process of critical thinking into language, or how to read actively. Because I am a member of the faculty team that developed this course and taught it during the pilot phase as well as twice more this year, I would like to speak to you primarily about Focus on Life.

Practice in increasingly sophistocated modes of critical thinking is provided in this course by group discussions of reading assignments which begin by emphasizing literal understanding and then move through analysis to synthesis, and by writing assignments in which students first narrate a single event and finally integrate all of the activities of the course with their own personal experience. During the first weeks of the course, when students are reading educational philosophers (who discuss the relationship between experience and education)--including Plato, Mill, Dewey and Freire--they write two narrative papers.

In the first they describe a single early educational experience and in the second they identify several major educational influences in their lives. At this time they also begin to keep a learning journal in which they write their personal reflections on the books being read and the class discussions. At the end of this first section of the course they integrate the ideas of the philosophers with their own previous educational experiences through group discussion and set forth their own philosophies of education in the form of an expository essay.

In the second part of the course the students explore the learning experiences of others by reading and discussing a series of novels and autobiographies in which lanugage is being used less literally. The writing assignment during this unit is a longer critical essay about literature organized as a comparison and contrast of two characters.

Once more the students are asked to integrate their insights about these characters with their own personal experiences. The final writing assignment of the course is a long integrative paper in which, as I said before, the students relate all of the activities of the course to their own lives. As raw material for this assignment they have not only the shorter formal papers in which they have already integrated some segments of the course, but also the reflections recorded in their learning journals.

Assistance for those who never achieved proficiency in writing or who achieved it long ago and have lost it through lack of practice is provided in Humanities: Focus on Life by means of a variety of instructional techniques. The strategies that are used have been chosen for several reasons: first of all, they acknowledge the ability and the willingness of adults to take on responsibility not only for their own learning but also for that of others and, secondly, they take into account, as far as possible, the needs of the individual learner.

During the first week of class, students with serious problems in organization or syntax are identified by means of a writing sample and asked to enroll in the Writing Lab for weekly tutorial sessions on the writing assignments.

When the first paper is assigned, my colleague and I lead the group in a brainstorming session on possible topics so that everyone is clear about what is expected in the assignment and all of the students have at least some notion of what to write about. We also have them formulate a tentative thesis statement in the course of the session. Thereafter brainstorming on each assignment takes place prior to writing, generally in small groups, with my colleague and I moving from group to group. At the time each essay is assigned, some point about effective organization is reviewed and handouts exemplifying the point are distributed. Points covered include the thesis statement, some functions of the introductory paragraph, the concluding paragraph, unity, order and coherence in the body paragraphs, use of transitions, etc.

Students write the essays in several drafts and multiple copies of first drafts are brought to class for group editing. Again we lead the class in the first editing session using either something we have written or a paper from the previous semester in order to demonstrate the process. Thereafter editing takes place in groups of three in which students use editing sheets, at first supplied by us and later developed themselves during brainstorming sessions, to critique each other's papers. During the time alloted for group editing the groups are free to leave the classroom and work anywhere in the building they are comfortable. Once the editing sessions are under way, we circulate among the groups and provide assistance when requested.

The final drafts are usually evaluated by my colleague and me. At this time we attach handouts reviewing points of grammar and mechanics to papers which reveal problems in these areas. Before returning the papers to the entire class, we have several students who handled the assignment in a variety of successful ways read their papers to the class. Then we discuss the strengths of these papers. This strategy not only provides models which have been produced by ordinary mortals in the class, but it also indicates a standard against which the students can measure their own achievement when they get their papers back. Furthermore it identifies some of the strong writers who can be looked to for help in later editing sessions. If conferences with individual students are indicated, they are scheduled at this time. Sometimes a student in the course volunteers to meet with another student to give help with a particular writing problem.

In addition to the preparation and follow-up for specific assignments, instruction in writing also takes place through periodic evaluation, in the form of written critiques by the faculty team, of the learning journals; class discussions, when indicated, of writing-related problems such as anxiety, time management, etc.; and periodic feedback sheets in which students communicate their views of their problems and progress as writers.

Instruction in active reading takes place primarily through the use of Adler and Van Doren's How to Read a Book. One or two chapters per class are assigned and explicitly applied in class to the reading being discussed. Simultaneous emphasis on the two processes of reading and writing demonstrates they are reciprocal aspects of the same process.

Both the integrative papers and the course evaluations prepared by the students at the end of our three new courses for adults indicate that these courses have been an overwhelming success with and for the students. Although the majority of the students who enrolled in these courses felt that they were among the most demanding they had ever taken, they also felt that they were the most rewarding. Students in Focus on Life believed that they had a better understanding of the purpose of a liberal arts education and of themselves as learners and an improved ability to think critically and write coherently. Many also commented on the self-discipline and the commitment to learning they had developed and the confidence they now had in themselves to achieve whatever academic goals they set for themselves. Finally the evaluation forms of all three courses reveal that the essays, the journal, and the integrative papers were popular assignments with the students in spite of the work they involved. This suggests that the courses all had a significant impact on the students' ability to think critically, integrate current learning with life experience, work independently and in groups, and write logically and coherently.